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ABSTRACT

Many students in public speaking classes have trouble finding topics and material that will support their ideas effectively. Too often students have a conceptual emphasis, substituting lengthy explanations about their ideas, in place of images, metaphors, and specific details of carefully observed events that make ideas vivid and meaningful. A three part exercise can help students trust more in their own experiences when they search for topics and look for material to support their ideas. The first phase is a breathing and relaxation exercise. This is followed by a visualization phase, in which the students let their minds wander over recent events in their lives, while the third phase involves putting those visualizations into words and then sharing them with peers. At the end of the exercise, students give a general response to what happened. Some students want to tell their stories again before the whole group. They respond to each other, picking up the universal truths contained in the stories, and finding themselves absorbed in the concreteness of the events described. The purpose of the exercise becomes clarified, and students become more aware of how easily they can find speech topics and material supporting their ideas. (HTH)

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Finding Speech Topics and Supporting Material

Many students in public speaking classes have trouble finding topics and material that will support their ideas effectively. This paper presents a description of an exercise used to help students recognize the value of their own experiences as a rich source for ideas and supports.

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During my years of teaching public speaking, I have come to realize the extent to which too many students place little value on their own experiences. They may spend days, even weeks, looking for a speech topic, discarding one idea after another, searching for a subject that will be "interesting." They believe that their experiences are so ordinary that it is only the topic "out there," unrelated to their own immediate lives, which will be of real interest to an audience. And all the while they miss the possibilities around them. All the small happenings in a day, interactions with family, friends, strangers, neighbors, and their relationship to the environment go unnoticed. These experiences are considered too simple and mundane from which to draw their topic.

At this moment, I recall a story Loren Eisley writes about in his book, The Unexpected Universe. When he was on his knees examining an abandoned boat, Eisley looked up and into the eyes of a pup fox. Not having learned yet to be afraid, the fox, with a chicken bone in his mouth, began to tilt his head, signaling his new companion to play with him. Eisley responded to the invitation. He found his own chicken bone and began to move in rhythm with the fox. For one glorious moment he knew the meaning of cosmic play and felt his connection to all living beings. He writes: "The universe was swinging in some fantastic fashion around to present its face, and the face was so small that the

universe itself was laughing."[1] Fertile ideas are contained in the ordinary events of our life if we give them enough attention and reflect on their meaning.

Our life experiences are the food for ideas. Too often students have a conceptual emphasis, substituting lengthy explanations about their ideas in place of images, metaphors, and specific details of carefully observed events which make ideas vivid and meaningful. For this reason, I have developed an exercise to help students trust more in their own experiences when they search for topics and look for material to support their ideas.[2] The following is a description of how I present the exercise.

First, I allow time for the students to get centered and relaxed. The ability to be present in the moment comes more readily when the body is free of rigidities and the mind is free of preoccupations. Simple recall of how one is breathing is a start. Awareness leads to change. I ask the students to close their eyes and notice their breathing.

> Are you holding your breath? Is your breathing shallow? Is it coming rapidly? Take in a breath slowly and then

[1]Loren Eisley, The Unexpected Universe (New York: A Harcourt/HBJ Book Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1969), p. 210.

[2]The seed of this exercise came out of a workshop given by Eileen Jones, movement teacher in New York City.

> let it out slowly, feeling the air being exhaled throughout your whole body, right out through your fingertips. Notice what is going on in your body. Where do you feel tightness? Draw your attention to your feet, legs, etc. Let go of any holding on to energy that you feel. Feel the chair you are sitting on. What parts of your body feel the air? Can you hear your heart beating? What sounds do you hear in the room? What can you hear outside the room?

Time spent aiding the students to be open and receptive to the present moment is a necessary preparation for the rest of the exercise.

Next, I start the visualization process.

> Let your mind wander over the recent events of your life. Maybe something happened this morning or yesterday which catches your attention. Let the images appear as if on a large, white screen in front of you. As the images pop up, select one. Anyone will do. It doesn't have to be a great event. It can be a tiny gesture or look. Stay with the image you have chosen, filling in as many details as you can. What is happening? What do you see? Who or what is in the scene? What do you hear? Can you feel, touch, smell, taste anything? What are you doing? How do you feel?

I ask a sufficient number of questions to evoke specific details in the visualization. Meaning emerges more clearly when one pays attention to the concrete detail, when all the senses are used to recall what happened.

The third part of this exercise has to do with putting the visualization into words. I ask the students to describe mentally what they are imagining, with their eyes closed, in four or five sentences. Then, when they open their eyes, they tell the story

to the person next to them. I remind them to keep an economy of expression--four or five sentences. No big discussion. Let the event stand on its own merits.

After the students tell each other their stories, I have them close their eyes again and take time to recall what happened, noticing how the story changed when they said it aloud to someone. What details were added? What was left out? Sometimes I have them tell the story again to another person and see how the details change.

The fourth step is the reflective period. It is the time for extracting the meaning in the event. The students close their eyes and think about their stories.

> What are you aware of as a result of this experience? What insight comes to you? Put your idea into a sentence. Keep it in just one sentence--a sentence containing the awareness you get from the experience.

When they are ready, I ask the students to open their eyes, turn to someone, a previous partner or someone new, and tell the story again, keeping in mind the idea formulated in the sentence but not necessarily including the abstracted statement of the story's meaning. With a clearer sense of the meaning of the event, students will be more selective in their choice of details.

At the end of the exercise, I ask for a general response to what happened. Some students want to tell their stories again before the whole group. They respond to each other, picking up the universal truths contained in the stories, and finding

themselves absorbed in the concreteness of the events described. The purpose of the exercise is clarified. They become more aware of the easy access they have to finding speech topics and supporting material for their ideas.

Let me illustrate by doing the exercise now as I sit at the typewriter. With my eyes closed, I become aware of tightness in the back of my neck. I take a few deep breaths, releasing the blocked energy. I am sitting quietly, listening to the sounds within and without--the heart beating, papers shuffling, the air conditioner humming. I feel the hard chair underneath me. Now my mind wanders to the events of yesterday. I think of rushing to teach a class--looking at my tire needing air--stopping at a gas station--the mechanic putting air in the tire but becoming sullen and abrupt when I ask him about a possible leak--my ride up the Taconic parkway at sixty miles an hour--coming out of class to see a flat--inching my way to the nearest gas station--another mechanic pointing to a nail in the tire. . . I focus on the first mechanic and formulate my sentences:

> I pull up at a gas station and ask the attendant to check the right front tire. He puts air in it. I ask if he thinks there might be a leak. He says: 'I don't know' and walks away. I am anxious but drive away doing nothing more about it.

Then, closing my eyes, I reflect on the meaning of the event for me. I formulate the idea in a sentence:

> Don't let another's negativity determine your own actions.

I can draw topics out of this idea for my next speech and use the story as a means of support. The event led me to the topic.

And so it is with all events. If we pay enough attention to even the most ordinary events, the possibilities of a world of meaning are open to us--that is, if we have eyes to see and ears to hear.

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